

ocean sciences. North American research clearly enjoys a preference, but the scope is always widened to a competent global perspective of “planet ocean.”

I recommend this fascinating book without hesitation to anyone with an interest in ocean sciences, in the history of exploration of the sea, and in those factors that have

jointly shaped the ocean and its marvellous life. I only regret I never had a book like this at hand while I was a student.

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Book Review

Evo-devo on the piazza

Forms of Becoming: The Evolutionary Biology of Development by Alessandro Minelli. Translated by Mark Epstein. Princeton University Press, 2009. US\$27.95/£19.95 hbk (242 pages) ISBN: 978 0 691 13568 7

Christian Peter Klingenberg

Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Manchester, Michael Smith Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PT, UK



Imagine a warm summer evening somewhere in northern Italy. We are sitting in a café in the town square, watching the children play and the people go by, as we leisurely sip our favourite drink (for me, on this particular occasion, that's a glass of wine from the Veneto region). A gentleman approaches our table. “May I introduce? This is Alessandro Minelli, professor of zoology at the University of

Padua.” The professor sits down and, after a while, we start talking about science. He explains his research on segment numbers on centipedes and how this relates to fundamental problems in evolutionary developmental biology. It is clear that he not only has a very broad knowledge of zoology, development and evolution, but also is widely read in the history and philosophy of science. He speaks in a lively, engaging manner of the latest developments in evo-devo and the work by pioneers from previous centuries, providing a broad perspective on many of the problems that are currently at the forefront of the field. His tone is relaxed, yet with all the scholarship you might expect from a professor who is teaching at one of Europe's oldest universities.

Except for the scenery and the drink, this is pretty much what you get from *Forms of Becoming*. It is a cross-section through a rich selection of topics in evolutionary developmental biology, which are presented in an informal, conversational style that will be suitable for a broad readership. The major chapters of the book are divided into short sections, most of one or two pages, which present parts of the overall argument as concise vignettes.

Some of the vignettes represent more or less the “official” view of those topics, as one might find in review papers or textbooks, such as summaries of the role of the *Hox* genes, or cell lineages of *C. elegans*. Other sections of the book, however, put a decisively personal slant on the respective topics. A case in point is a fairly long chapter outlining a view of many developmental processes as competition between the cells or tissues of the organism for resources. Other examples are the sections on repetitions of parts, or on the relationship of limbs to the anterior-posterior body axis. These views can differ from the ‘mainstream’ opinion, but are all thought provoking. If there really were a conversation in the café on the piazza, I am sure there would be animated discussions between Minelli and his readers, long into the night.

Because this book was written for a popular readership, there are no references to the literature in the text. Instead, there is a general list of recommended readings at the end of the book, which also contains specific suggestions relating to each chapter.

The book is a translation from the Italian. Unfortunately, some elements are lost in translation. This affects not only the details of natural history, but also the freshness of style.

Minelli provides his distinctive perspective of the field of evolutionary developmental biology. Whether or not readers agree with him on specific points, he raises many interesting questions that might well be fuel for long discussions on a summer evening. Overall, this book is stimulating reading and will provide much food for thought.

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